

Vol. 8, No. 3



## At the Café Lovely

by Rattawut Lapcharoensap

Every so often I dream of my brother’s face on fire, his brown eyes—eyes very much like my own—staring at me through a terrible mask of flames. I wake to the scent of burning flesh, his fiery face looming before me as an afterimage, and in that darkness I am eleven again. I have not yet learned to trespass. I have not yet learned to grieve. Nor have I learned to pity us—my brother, my mother, and me—and Anek and I are in Bangkok sitting on the roof of our mother’s house smoking cigarettes, watching people drift by on their bicycles while the neighbors release their mangy dogs for the night to roam the city’s streets.

It was a Saturday. Saturdays meant the city didn’t burn the dump behind our house. We could breathe freely again. We wouldn’t have to shut all the windows to keep out the stench, sleep in suffocating heat. Downstairs, we could hear Ma cooking in the outdoor kitchen, the clang of pots and pans, the warm smell of rice curling up toward us.

“Hey kid,” Anek said, stubbing his cigarette on the corrugated tin roof. “What’s for dinner?” I sniffed the air. I had a keen sense of smell in those days. *Like a dog*, Anek told his friends once. *My little brother can smell your ma taking a crap on the other side of town.*

“Rice.”

“Sure.”

“Green beans. Fried egg.”

“No meat?”

“No. I don’t smell any meat.”

“Oi.” Anek threw a leaf over the edge of the roof. It hovered for a second before dropping swiftly to the street. “I’m tired of this. I’m tired of green beans.”

Our father had been dead for four months. The insurance money from the factory was running out. There had been a malfunctioning crane and a crate the size of our house full of little wooden toys waiting to be sent to the children of America. Not a very large crate when I think about the size of the house, but big enough to kill a man when the crate fell on him from a height of ten meters. At the funeral, I was surprised by how little sadness I felt, as if it wasn’t our father laid out before the mourners at all—wasn’t him lying there in that rubberwood box, wasn’t his body popping and crackling in the temple furnace like kindling—but a striking replica of our father in a state of rest. Pa had taken us to the wax museum once, and I remember thinking that he had somehow commissioned the museum to make a beautiful replica of himself and would be appearing any minute now at his own funeral.

After the cremation, we went with Ma to scatter the ashes at Pak Nam. We rode a small six-seater boat out to where the brown river emptied into the green sea. We leaned over the side—all three of us tipping the tiny tin urn together—while Ma tried to mutter a prayer through her tears.

Anek lit another cigarette.

“Are you going out tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Can I come with?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But you said last time—”

“Stop whining. I know what I said last time. I said I might. I said maybe. I made no promises, kid. I told you no lies. Last I checked, ‘maybe’ didn’t mean ‘yes.’”

A month before for my birthday, Anek had taken me to the new American fast-food place at Sogo Mall. I was happy that day. I had dreamed all week of hamburgers and french fries and a nice cold soda and the air-conditioning of the place. During the ride to the mall, my arms wrapped around

my brother's waist, the motorcycle sputtering under us, I imagined sitting at one of those shiny plastic tables across from my brother. We would look like those university students I had seen through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the ones who laughed and sipped at their sodas. Afterward, we would walk into the summer sun with soft-serve sundaes, my brother's arm around my shoulder.

The place was packed, full of students and families clamoring for a taste of American fast food. All around us, people hungrily devoured their meals. I could smell beef cooking on the grill, hear peanut oil bubbling in the deep fryers. I stared at the illuminated menu above the counter.

"What should I get, Anek?"

"Don't worry, kid. I know just what you'd like."

We waited in line, ordered at the counter, took our tray to an empty booth. Anek said he wasn't hungry, but I knew he had only enough money to order for me: a small burger and some fries. I decided not to ask him about it. I wasn't going to piss him off, what with it being my birthday and what with people being so touchy about money ever since Pa died. As we walked to the booth, I told Anek we could share the meal, I probably wouldn't be able to finish it all myself anyway.

Even though he had been telling me all month about how delicious and great the place was, my brother looked a little uncomfortable. He kept glancing around nervously. It occurred to me then that it was probably his first time there as well. We had on our best clothes that day—Anek in his blue jeans and white polo shirt, me in my khakis and red button-down—but even then I knew our clothes couldn't compare to the other kids' clothes. Their clothes had been bought in the mall; ours had been bought at the weekend bazaar and were cheap imitations of what they wore.

Anek stared across the table at me. He smiled. He tousled my hair. "Happy birthday, kid. Eat up."

"Thanks, Anek."

I unwrapped the burger. I peeked under the bun at the gray meat, the limp green pickles, the swirl of yellow mustard and red ketchup. Anek stared out the window at the road in front of the mall. For some reason, I suddenly felt like I should eat as quickly as possible so we could get the hell out of there. I didn't feel so excited any more. And I noticed that the place smelled strange—a scent I'd never encountered before—a bit rancid, like palaa fish left too long in the sun. Later, I would find out it was cheese.

I took a few apprehensive bites at the bun. I bit into the brittle meat. I chewed and I chewed and I chewed and finally swallowed, the thick mass inching slowly down my throat. I took another bite. Then I felt my stomach shoot up to my throat like one of those bottle rockets Anek and I used to set off in front of Apae's convenience store just to piss him off. I remember thinking, *Oh fuck, oh fuck, please no*, but before I could take a deep breath to settle things, it all came rushing out of me. I threw up all over that shiny American linoleum floor.

A hush fell over the place, followed by a smattering of giggles.

"Oh, you fucking pussy," Anek hissed.

"I'm sorry, Anek."

"You goddamn, motherfucking, monkey-cock-sucking piece of low class *pussy*."

I wiped my lips with my forearm. Anek pulled me to my feet, led me out through the glass double doors, his hand on my collar. I tried to say sorry again, but before I could mouth the words my heart felt like it might explode and—just as we cleared the doors—I sent a stream of gray-green vomit splashing against the hot concrete.

"Oh. My. Fucking. Lord. Why?" Anek moaned, lifting his face to the sky. "Oh why Lord? Why hast thou forsaken me?" Anek and I had been watching a lot of Christian movies on TV lately.

When we came to a traffic stop an hour later, I was leaning against my brother's back, still feeling ill, thick traffic smoke whipping around us. Anek turned to me and said: "That's the first and last time, kid. I can't believe you. All that money for a bunch of puke. No more fucking hamburgers for you."

We finished watching the sun set over the neighborhood, a panoply of red and orange and purple and blue. Anek told me that Bangkok sunsets were the most beautiful sunsets in the world. "It's the pollution," he said. "Brings out the colors in the sky." Then after Anek and I smoked the last of the cigarettes, we climbed down from the roof.

At dinner, as usual, we barely said a word to each other. Ma had been saying less and less ever since that crate of toys killed our father. She was all headshakes and nods, headshakes and nods. We picked at our green beans, slathered fish sauce on our rice.

"Thanks for the meal, Ma."

Ma nodded.

"Yeah, Ma, this is delicious."

She nodded again.

Besides the silence, Ma's cooking was also getting worse, but we couldn't bring ourselves to

say anything about it. What's more, she had perfected the art of moving silently through the house. She seemed an apparition in those days. She'd retreated into herself. She no longer watched over us. She simply watched. I'd be doodling in my book at the kitchen table and all of a sudden Ma would just be sitting there, watching me with her chin in one hand. Or Anek and I would be horsing around in the outdoor kitchen after dinner, throwing buckets of dirty dishwater on each other, and we'd look over our shoulders to find Ma standing against the crumbling concrete siding of the house. Anek told me she caught him masturbating in the bathroom once. He didn't even realize she had opened the door until he heard it shut, a loud slam so he could know that she'd seen him. Anek didn't masturbate for weeks after that and neither did I.

One night I caught Ma staring at her own image in the bedroom mirror with an astonished look on her face, as if she no longer recognized her own sallow reflection. It seemed Pa's death had made our mother a curious spectator of her own life, though when I think of her now I wonder if she was simply waiting for us to notice her grief. But we were just children, Anek and I, and when children learn to acknowledge the gravity of their loved ones' sorrows they're no longer children.

"That woman needs help," Anek said, after we washed the dishes that evening.

"She's just sad, Anek."

"Listen, kid, I'm sad too, okay? Do you see me walking around like a mute though? Do you see me sneaking around the house like I'm some fucking ninja?"

I dropped it. I didn't feel like talking about the state of things that night, not with Anek. I knew he would get angry if we talked about Pa, if we talked about his death, if we talked about what it was doing to Ma. I never knew what to do with my brother's anger in those days. I simply and desperately needed his love.

I think Anek felt bad about the hamburger incident because he started giving me lessons on the motorcycle, an old 350cc Honda our father had ridden to the factory every morning. After Pa died, Ma wanted to sell the bike, but Anek convinced her not to. He told her the bike wasn't worth much. He claimed it needed too many repairs. But I knew that aside from some superficial damage—chipped paint, an ugly crack in the rear mudguard, rusted-through places in the exhaust pipe—the bike was in fine working condition. Anek wanted the bike for himself. He'd been complaining all year about being the only one among his friends without a bike. We'd spent countless hours at the mall showroom, my brother wandering among the gleaming new bikes while I trailed behind him absentmindedly. And though I thought then that my brother had lied to my mother about the bike out of selfishness, I know now that Pa did not leave us much. That Honda was Anek's inheritance.

He'd kick-start it for me—I didn't have the strength to do it myself—and I'd hop on in front and ride slowly through the neighborhood with Anek behind me.

"I'll kill you, you little shit. I'll kill you if you break my bike," he'd yell when I approached a turn too fast or when I had trouble steadying the handlebars after coming out of one. "I'm gonna nail you to a fucking cross like Jesus-fucking-Christ himself."

My feet barely reached the gear pedal, but I'd learned, within a week, to shift into second by sliding off the seat. I'd accelerate out of first, snap the clutch, slide off the seat just so, then pop the gear into place. We'd putter by the city dump at twenty, twenty-five kilos an hour, and some of the *dek khaya*, the garbage children whose families lived in shanties on the dump, would race alongside us, urging me to go faster, asking Anek if they could ride too.

I began to understand the way Anek had eyed those showroom bikes. I began to get a taste for speed.

"That's as fast as I'm letting you go," Anek once said when we got home. "Second gear's good enough for now."

"But I can do it, Anek. I can do it."

"Get taller, kid. Get stronger."

"C'mon, Anek. Please. Second is so slow. It's stupid."

"I'll tell you what's stupid, little brother. What's stupid is you're eleven years old. What's stupid is you go into turns like a drunkard. What's stupid is you can't even reach the gear pedal. Grow, kid. Give me twenty more centimeters. Then maybe we'll talk about letting you do third. Maybe."

"Why can't I come?"

"Because you can't, that's why."

"But you said last week—"

"I already told you, vomit-boy. I know what I said last week. I said maybe. Which part of that didn't you understand? I didn't say, 'Oh yes! Of course, buddy! I love you so much! You're my super pal! I'd love to take you out next Saturday!' now did I?"

"Just this once, Anek. I promise I won't bother you."

"I don't think so."

"Please?"

"Please nothing, little brother. Sit at home and watch a soap with Ma or something."

"But why, Anek? Why can't I go with you?"

"Because I'm going where grown men go, that's why. Because last I checked, last time I saw you naked, you were far from being grown."

"I promise I won't bother you, Anek. I'll just sit in a corner or something. Really. I promise. I'll stay out of your way. Just don't leave me here with Ma tonight."

When we were young, our mother would put on her perfume every evening before Pa came home. She would smell like jasmine, fresh picked off a tree. Pa, he would smell of the cologne he dabbed on after he got out of the shower. Although I would never smell the ocean until we went out to Pak Nam to scatter his ashes, I knew that my father smelled like the sea. I just knew it. Anek and I would sit between them, watching some soap opera on TV, and I would inhale their scents, the scents of my parents, and imagine millions of tiny white flowers floating on the surface of a wide and green and bottomless ocean.

But those scents are lost to me now, and I've often wondered if, in my belated sorrow, with all my tardy regrets, I've imagined them all these years.

Anek finally gave in and took me. We rode out to Minburi District along the new speedway, the engine squealing beneath us. We were going so fast that my face felt stretched impossibly tight. I wanted to tell Anek to slow down but I remembered that I had promised to stay out of his way.

We were wearing our best clothes again that night, the same old outfits: Anek in his blue jeans and white polo shirt, me in my khakis and red button-down. When we walked out of the house Ma glanced up from the TV with a look that said, *What are you all dressed up for?*, and Anek told her he was taking me out to the new ice-skating rink, he heard it was all the rage. I even said, "Imagine that, Ma. Ice-skating in Bangkok," but she just nodded, her lips a straight thin line, and went back to watching television.

"Imagine that, Ma . . ." Anek teased when we walked out.

"Eat shit, Anek."

"Whoa there. Be careful, little one. Don't make me change my mind."

When we arrived at the place, it was not what I had imagined at all. I expected mirror balls and multicolored lights and loud American music and hundreds of people dancing inside—like places I'd seen in the district west of our neighborhood, places all the *farangs* frequented at night. It didn't look like that. It was only a shophouse, like the thousands of tiny two-story shophouses all over the city—short and common, square and concrete, in need of a new paint job. A pink neon sign blinked in the tinted window. *CAFÉ LOVELY*, it said in English. I could hear the soft, muffled sounds of upcountry music reaching across the street.

"This is it?"

"I can take you home," Anek said. "That's not a problem."

The place smelled of mothballs. There was an old jukebox in the corner. A couple of girls in miniskirts and tank tops and heavy makeup danced and swayed with two balding, middle-aged local men. The men looked awkward with those girls in their arms, feet moving out of time, their large hands gripping slender waists. In a dark corner, more girls were seated at a table, laughing. They sounded like a flock of excited birds. I'd never seen so many girls in my life.

Three of Anek's friends were already at a table.

"What's with the babysitting?" one of them asked, grinning.

"Sorry," Anek said sheepishly as we sat down. "Couldn't bear to leave him home with my crazy ma."

"You hungry, kid?" said another. "Want a hamburger?"

"No, thanks."

"Hey," Anek said. "Leave him alone. Let's just pretend he's not here."

The song ended. I saw one of the girls go up a set of stairs at the back, leading one of the men by the hand. I didn't even have to ask. I wondered if Anek, too, would be going up those stairs at the end of the night. And although I had been disappointed at first by the café's shoddy facade, I found myself excited now by its possibilities.

Anek must've seen me staring because he slapped me hard across the back of the head.

"Ow," I cried, rubbing my head with a palm. "That fucking hurt."

"Keep your eyes to yourself, little man."

"That's right," one of his friends intoned, the one who'd asked me if I wanted a hamburger. "Be careful what you wish for, boy. The AIDS might eat your dick."

"Not before it eats your mom's, though," I replied, and they all laughed, even my brother, Anek, who said, "Awesome," and smiled at me for the first time all evening.

Anek had come home one night when I was nine and told me that Pa had taken him out for his fifteenth birthday. The city dump was burning; there was a light red glow in the sky from the

pyre. Even though our windows were shut, I could still smell the putrid scent of tires and plastic and garbage burning, the sour odor seeping through our windows. I was sleeping in my underwear, two fans turned on high, both fixed in my direction. Anek walked into the room, stripped down to his underwear, and thrust out his hand.

"Bet you can't tell me what this smell is."

I sniffed his fingers. It smelled like *awsuan*: oysters simmered in egg yolk. But somehow I knew it wasn't food.

"What is it?"

Anek chuckled.

"What is it, Anek?"

"That, my dear brother, is the smell of"—he put his hand up to his face, sniffed it hungrily—"heaven."

I blinked at him.

"A woman, kid. You know what that is? Pa took me to a *sophaeni* tonight. And let me tell you, little one, when he takes you for *your* fifteenth birthday, you'll never be the same again. This scent"—he raised his hand to his face again—"it'll change your fucking life."

Anek and his friends had already poured themselves a few drinks while I sat there sipping my cola—half listening to their banter, half watching the girls across the room—when one of Anek's friends stood up and said: "It's getting to that time of night, guys."

I didn't know what the hell was going on, I just thought he was a funny drunk, but then Anek got up and told the bartender we were going outside for a breath of fresh air. One of the girls came up to us, put a hand on Anek's shoulder, and said, "Leaving so soon?" but Anek told her not to worry, to be patient, he'd be back to give her what she wanted. The girl winked at me and said, "Who's the handsome little boy?" and I smiled back, but Anek had to be an asshole, so he said, "Oh, that's my virgin brother," which annoyed me because no girl had ever winked at me before and I thought she was beautiful.

I followed Anek and his friends out of the Café Lovely and into a small alley off the shophouse row. Anek didn't want to leave me by myself. He said it didn't look good—leaving a little boy alone in a place like that—but I could tell that he didn't want me to come either. As we cut into the dark alley, I had a feeling that a breath of fresh air was the last thing we were going to get.

When we stopped, one of Anek's friends pulled out a small container of paint thinner from a plastic bag. "All right," he said, prying at the lid with a small pocketknife. The lid flew open with a loud pop and rolled down the dark alley, swirling to a stop by a dumpster. I saw the quick shadows of roaches scattering in its wake. That's what the alley smelled like—roaches: dank and humid like the back room where Ma put away our father's belongings. Anek's friend poured half the can into the plastic bag, the liquid thick and translucent, the bag sagging from the weight, while the others flicked their cigarettes into the sewer ditch along the side of the alley. The thinner gave off a sharp, strong odor, punched little pinpricks in my nostrils, and reminded me of days when Pa and Anek used to fumigate the house. Anek's friend pulled out another plastic bag from his back pocket and put the first bag with the thinner inside it.

"Okay." He held out the double bag with one hand, offering it to his friends, the way I'd seen butchers at the market holding dead chickens by the necks. I could hear the jukebox starting up again in the café, another old upcountry tune echoing softly down the alley. "Who's first?"

For a second, they all stood with their hands in their pockets. Then Anek reached out and took the bag with a quick, impatient gesture.

"Let's just get this over with," he said. "I tell you guys, though, one hit and I'm done. I don't like having my little brother around this shit."

I realized then what they were doing. I knew what huffers were, but I'd always imagined little kids and strung-out homeless guys in the Klong Toey slum with their heads buried in pots of rubber cement. I suddenly became very afraid—I wanted to grab the bag out of my brother's hands—even as I longed to watch Anek do it, wanted, in fact, to do it myself, to show Anek and his friends my indifference.

Anek brought the mouth of the bag to his chin. He took a big, deep breath, pulled his entire body back like it was a slingshot, then blew into the bag, inflating it like a balloon, the loose ends covering half his face, and it made a sound like a quick wind blowing through a sail. The bag grew larger and larger and I was afraid that it might burst, that the thinner would go flying everywhere. Anek looked at me the whole time he blew, his eyes growing wider and wider. He kept blowing and blowing and blowing, and I knew that my brother was blowing for a long time because one of the guys said, "Fucking inhale already, Anek," but he kept on blowing and blowing and all that time he kept looking at me with those eyes about to pop out of his head. I don't know what he was trying to tell me then, looking at me like that, but I remember noticing for the first time that he had our mother's eyes. He finally inhaled, sucked his breath back into his chest, the plastic balloon collapsing in on itself, and then my brother was blinking hard,

teetering, like a boxer stunned by a swift and surprising blow, and I knew that whatever it was he had smelled, whatever scent he had just inhaled, it was knocking him off his feet. He handed the bag to one of the other guys and said, "C'mon kid, let's get out of here," and I followed my brother out of the dark alley, back into the dimly lit street.

Years later, I'd be in a different alley with friends of my own, and one of the guys, high off a can of spray paint, would absentmindedly light a cigarette after taking a hit and his face would burst into a sheet of blue flames. He ran around the alley wild with panic, running into the sides of the buildings, stumbling and falling and getting back to his feet again, hands flying violently around his burning face as if trying to beat back a swarm of attacking insects. He never made a sound, just ran around that alley with his face on fire, the flames catching in his hair and his clothes, looking like some giant ignited match in the shape of a man. For a second, we couldn't quite comprehend what was happening—some of us laughed, most of us were just stunned—before I managed to chase the boy down, tackle him to the ground, and beat out the flames from his face with my T-shirt. His eyes were wild with terror and we just stared at each other for a moment before he started to weep hysterically, his body shaking under mine, the terrible scent of burnt flesh and singed hair filling the alley. His lashes and eyebrows had been burned cleanly off his face. His eyelids were raw, pink. His face began to swell immediately, large white welts blooming here and there. And he just kept on crying beneath me, calling for his mother and father, blubbering incoherently in the high, desperate voice of a child.

Back at the café, I could tell that the thinner was setting in. Anek kept tilting back in his seat, dilating his eyes. He took a long swig of his rye, poured himself another. I knew we wouldn't be going home for a while. The same girl who had winked at me earlier walked across the room and sat down at our table. She put her arm around my shoulder. I felt my body tense. She smelled like menthol, like the prickly-heat powder Anek and I sprinkled on ourselves to keep cool at night.

"Hi, handsome."

"Hi."

I sipped at the last of my cola. Across the room, I noticed the girls looking our way, giggling.

"That's my brother," Anek drawled.

"I know, Anek."

"He's a little high," I laughed.

"Looks like it."

"Yeah." Anek smiled, slow and lazy. "Just a little."

"Where are the rest?" she asked me.

"Outside."

"What about you, handsome? Are you high?"

"No."

"Ever been?"

"Yeah. Of course. Plenty of times."

She laughed, threw her head far back. Menthol. I felt my heart pounding in my chest. I wanted to smear her carmine lips with my hands. I reached across the table for Anek's Krong Thips and lit one.

"You're adorable," she said, pinching one of my cheeks. I felt myself blush. "But you shouldn't be smoking those things at your age."

"I know," I said, smiling at her, taking a drag. "Cigarettes are bad."

"C'mon," Anek said, getting up abruptly, swaying a little bit. He reached out and grabbed her hand from my shoulder. "C'mon." He nodded toward the staircase. "Let's go."

She stood up, her hand dangling in my brother's, while I sat between them.

"What about the kid?" she asked, looking down at me.

"Oh, he'll be fine."

"Maybe not tonight, Anek. We shouldn't leave the kid by himself."

"Hey barfboy," Anek said. "You gonna be okay?"

I looked up at my brother. He still had the girl's hand in his own. I took a long drag of my cigarette.

"Yeah. I'll be fine, Anek. I'm not a kid anymore."

Anek smiled as if he found me amusing. I wanted to wipe the smile off his face. I felt angry. I didn't want to be abandoned. Anek must've sensed this because there suddenly seemed something sad about my brother's smile. He dropped the girl's hand. He reached out and tapped me lightly on the head.

"Okay, kid. You don't have to be so tough all the time," he said finally. He took a deep breath, his voice a little steadier, his eyes a little wider. "Tell you what. I'm just gonna go put some music in the jukebox. Then Nong and I are gonna dance. Then we're gonna go upstairs for a while. Just a short while. We won't be long. I promise. Then, if you want, we'll go home, okay?"

But I just took another drag of my cigarette, watched the girls in the corner, tried not to meet my brother's eyes.

She led him out to the dance floor. They stood by the jukebox and he slipped a few coins into the machine, steadying himself with one hand. A record came on, the sound of high Isan flutes and xylophones and a hand drum striking up the first few bars. Anek clumsily took one of the girl's hands, hooked an arm around her waist, and they started moving to the music. They stood close, their chins on each other's shoulders, though perhaps a little too close for the girl, because she leaned away from my brother a few times. But then again, maybe it was because my brother was high, drunk, and they kept losing their balance. They didn't look like dancers at all after a while; they looked like they were just holding each other up, falling into and out of each other's body.

I hadn't recognized the tune at first—I thought it was just another generic upcountry ballad—but then a woman's falsetto came soaring over the instruments and I remembered that it was an old record of Ma's, something she and Pa used to listen to in the early afternoon hours before the endlessly growing mass of garbage burned behind our house. Those days curry and fish in tamarind sauce would be cooking on the stove, the aroma wafting into the house, and I swear that right then, listening to that music, I could smell it on the tip of my nose.

*Oh beloved, so sad was my departure . . .*

I looked at Anek and the girl. She couldn't have been more than sixteen years old—younger than my brother—but it seemed clear to me now that she was the one holding him up, directing his course, leading him. I wondered how many men she had already held up tonight, how many more she would hold in the thousands of nights before her. I wondered whether she was already finding the force of their weight unbearable. I wondered whether I would be adding my weight to that mass one day. She held him close now and he pulled away, fell out of sync, though they continued to move across the floor as slowly and languorously as the music in the café.

*. . . I am tired, I am broken, I am lost . . .*

When the song ended, they pulled away from each other, and Anek took the girl by the hand and led her toward the staircase. As they began to mount the stairs, the girl said something to my brother and they both stopped to look back at me. My brother smiled weakly then, raised a hand in my direction. I looked away, pretended not to see the gesture, stirring the ash in the tray with my cigarette. When I looked back they were gone.

The place fell silent. A balding, middle-aged man walked down the stairs. He made for the door, his steps quick and certain, as if he couldn't wait to leave. When he passed by my table, I caught a whiff of him, and his scent lingered on my nostrils for awhile. He smelled like okra.

I stood up. I don't know why I walked toward that staircase. Perhaps it was childish curiosity. Or perhaps I wanted to see, once and for all, what secrets, what sins, what comforts those stairs led one to. Or perhaps I wanted to retrieve Anek before he did whatever it was I thought he might do.

I had imagined darkness and was surprised, when I arrived at the top of the stairs, to find a brightly lit hallway flanked on both sides by closed doors. The corridor smelled sweet, sickly, as if it had been perfumed to cover up some stench. The bare walls gleamed under the buzzing fluorescent fixtures. I heard another song start up downstairs, laughter again from the table of girls. I walked slowly down the hallway; the noises downstairs faded to a murmur. I felt like I had surfaced into another world and left those distant, muffled sounds beneath me, underwater. As I crept along, careful to be silent, I began to hear a chorus of ghostly, guttural groans coming from behind the doors. I heard a man whimper; I heard another cry out incoherently. After a while, those rooms seemed—with their grunting and moaning—like torture chambers in which faceless men suffered untold cruelties. I wondered if my brother was making any of these noises. I thought of the video Anek had borrowed from one of his friends, the women in them cooing and squealing perversely, and how strange it was now that none of the women could be heard. Instead, I could hear only the men growling away as if in some terrible, solitary animal pain. I imagined the men writhing against the women, and I wondered how these women—those girls sitting downstairs—could possibly endure in such silence.

Just as I turned the corner, a hand grabbed me by the collar, choking me. I was certain, for a moment, that I would now be dragged into one of the rooms and made to join that chorus of howling men.

"Little boy," a voice hissed in my ear. "Where do you think you're going?"

It was the bartender from downstairs. He looked down at me, brow furrowed, beads of spittle glistening at the corners of his lips. I smelled whiskey on his breath, felt his large, chapped hands on my neck as he pulled me toward him and lifted me off the concrete floor.

"You're in the wrong place," he whispered into my ear, while I struggled against his grips. "I should kill you for being up here. I should snap your head right off your fucking neck."

I screamed for Anek then. I sent my brother's name echoing down that empty hallway. I screamed his name over and over again as the bartender lifted me up into his thick, ropey arms.

The more I struggled against the bartender, the more dire my predicament seemed, and I cried out for my brother as I had never cried out before. The men seemed to stop their moaning then and, for a moment, I felt as if my cries were the only sound in the world. I saw a few doors open, a couple of women sticking out their heads to look at the commotion. The bartender walked backward with me, toward the staircase, as I kicked and struggled against his suffocating embrace.

Then, I saw my brother hobbling in his underwear, his blue jeans shackling his feet.

"Hey!" Anek yelled, staggering, bending down to gather up his jeans. "Hey!" The man stopped, loosened his grip on my body. "Hey!" Anek yelled again, getting closer now. "That's my little brother, you cocksucker. Put him down."

The bartender still had me, his breath hot on my neck. As Anek struggled to pull up his jeans I glimpsed the purple, bulbous head of his penis peeking over the waistband of his underwear. The bartender must've seen this too; he began to chuckle obscenely.

"Get him out of here, Anek," he said. Anek nodded grimly. The bartender put me down, shoved me lightly toward my brother. "You know I can't have him up here," he said.

"You okay, kid?" Anek asked, breathless, ignoring the bartender, bending down to look me in the eyes. I saw the girl standing in the hallway behind Anek, a towel wrapped loosely around her small body. She waved at me, smiling, and then walked back into the room. The other women disappeared as well. I heard the bartender going downstairs, the steps creaking under his weight. Soon, Anek and I were the only people left in that hallway, and for some reason—despite my attempts to steel myself—I began to cry. I tried to apologize to my brother through the tears.

"Oh shit," my brother muttered, pulling me to his chest. "C'mon, kid," he said. "Let's just go home."

We went to the bathroom. I stood sniveling by a urinal while Anek leaned over a sink and dashed water on his face. When we came back out, his steps were no longer unsteady, though his voice still quavered slightly. Beads of water glistened on his face. He lit a cigarette at the door and waved to the bartender and the girls in the corner. I couldn't look at them now.

We stepped into the street. His friends were still in the alley, laughing and stumbling, flinging pieces of garbage from the dumpster at each other. We stood at the mouth of the alley and Anek said, "See you later, boys," and one of them yelled back saying, "Wait, Anek! Wait! I have an idea! Let's put your kid brother in the dump!" But Anek just put an arm around my shoulder and said, "Maybe next time."

We crossed the street. Anek kick-started the motor-cycle. It sputtered and wheezed and coughed before settling into a soft, persistent purr. I started to climb onto the back, but Anek said, "What the hell are you doing? Can't you see I'm in no shape to take us home?"

"You can't be serious, Anek."

"Serious as our pa is dead, kid."

I stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. I climbed onto the front seat.

"I swear to God, though, you make so much as a dent on my bike and I'll—"

But I had already cocked the accelerator and we were on our way. Slowly, of course. I slipped off the seat a little so I could reach the pedal, snapped the clutch with my left hand, and popped the bike into second gear. We sputtered for a while like that along the streets of Minburi, crawling at fifteen kilos, and I made a sharp right onto the bridge that would take us out to the new speedway.

Years later I would ask Anek if he remembered this night. He would say that I made it up. He never would've taken me to the Café Lovely at such a young age, he'd say, never would've let me drive that bike home. He denies it now because he doesn't want to feel responsible for the way things turned out, for the way we abandoned our mother to that hot and empty house, for the thoughtless, desperate things I would learn to do. Later that same year, my mother would wake me up in the middle of the night. She would be crying. She would ask me to sleep again in her bed. And, for the first time, I would refuse her. I would deny Ma the comfort of my body.

After Anek moved to an apartment across the river in Thonburi, I gathered my father's belongings from the back room and pawned them while Ma was at work. I used the money to buy myself a motorcycle. When I got home, my mother was waiting for me. She came at me with a thousand impotent fists, and when she was finished, spent and exhausted, her small body quivering in my arms, she asked me to leave her house. I did. And I did not return to that house again until it was too late, until Anek called to say our mother was ill, that she wanted us by her side to accompany her through her final hours.

That night as we rode back from the Café Lovely, I felt my brother's arms around my waist, his head slumped on my shoulder. I remember thinking then about how I'd never felt the weight of my brother's head before. His hot, measured breaths warmed my neck. I could still smell the thinner's faint, sour scent wafting from his face. I suddenly became afraid that Anek had fallen asleep and would tumble off the bike at any moment.

"Are you awake, Anek?"

"Yeah, I'm awake."

"Good."

"Do me a favor. Eyes on the road."

"I'm glad you're awake, Anek."

"Third."

"What's that?"

"I said third."

"You sure?"

"It's a one-time offer, little man."

I slipped off the seat, accelerated a little, squeezed the clutch, and tapped the gear pedal just as we hit the speedway. I was so excited we might as well have broken the sound barrier, but the engine jolted us forward just enough that my grip weakened and we went swerving along the empty speedway, weaving wildly back and forth at thirty kilometers an hour.

"Easy now. Easy. There, there, you have it. Just take a deep breath now. Holy shit, I almost had to break your ass back there. You almost had us kissing the pavement."

I could feel the palms of my hands slick against the handle grips. Even at thirty kilos, the wind blew hot against our faces.

"Accelerate," Anek said.

"No fucking way."

"I said accelerate. This is a speedway, you know. Not a slow-way. I'd like to get home before dawn."

"You're out of your mind, Anek. That's the thinner talking."

"Listen, if you won't do it, I'll do it myself," he said, reaching over me for the throttle.

"Fine," I said, brushing his hand away. "I'll do it. Just give me a second."

We slowly gathered speed along the empty highway—thirty-five, forty, forty-five—and after a while, the concrete moving swiftly and steadily below our feet, I was beginning to feel a little more comfortable. Anek put his arms around my waist again, his chin still on my shoulder.

"Good," he whispered into my ear. "Good, good. You've got it. You're fucking doing it. You're really coasting now, boy. Welcome to the third gear, my little man."

"Now," he said. "Try fourth."

I didn't argue this time. I just twisted the accelerator some more, popped the bike into fourth, sliding smoothly off the seat then quickly back on. This time, to my surprise, our course didn't even waver. It was an easy transition. We were cruising comfortably now at sixty, sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five, faster and faster and faster still, the engine singing a high note beneath us as we flew along that straight and empty speedway. We didn't say a word to each other the rest of the way. And nothing seemed lovelier to me than that hot wind howling in my ears, the night blurring around us, the smell of the engine furiously burning gasoline.

*To read other stories from the Fall 2004 issue, click [here](#) to purchase it from our online store.*

[Back to Top](#)

© 2004 AZX LLC